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ABSTRACT

This digest examines the problem of upgrading rural school facilities, focusing on specific rural issues, conditions that interfere with teaching and learning, and new funding approaches. Almost half of U.S. public schools are in rural areas and small towns. Close rural school-community relationships may make it easier to make decisions, communicate with the community, and raise funds for facilities improvement. On the other hand, many rural districts have financial disadvantages: low enrollments, which diminish available construction money; lower property values, which lower the potential to borrow money; and high poverty rates. About half of rural and small-town schools report at least one facility problem. In addition to deterioration because of age, many rural schools must cope with new requirements for teaching and learning. These include laboratory classrooms, flexible instruction areas, multimedia centers, adequate space to accommodate parent involvement and an array of social and health services, electrical wiring and conduits for computers and other technology, accommodations for special needs students, and mandated removal of hazardous building materials. Fixing these problems will be costly, and despite increased school construction nationwide, rural districts have not kept up with urban areas. In 1997, Congress authorized Qualified Zone Academy Bonds to make school renovation funding more accessible to poor school districts. (Contains 18 references.) (SV)

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Improving Rural School Facilities for Teaching and Learning

Sarah Dewees

ERIC DIGEST

A 1995 U.S. General Accounting Office (U.S. GAO) study (1995a; 1995b; 1996) sparked renewed interest in the condition of education facilities nationwide. The GAO study, which remains the best source of information on school facilities, revealed a high number of inadequate buildings in urban, suburban, and rural areas.[1]

The most common problem is age. The average school building was built in 1946, and many are in disrepair due to lack of maintenance. Age-related deterioration is a problem in districts with inadequate access to capital improvement funding (Honeyman & Sayles, 1995). The U.S. GAO (1995a; 1995b; 1996) estimated the nation's schools needed $112 billion in repairs, renovations, and modernization to comply with federal mandates.

This Digest examines the problem of upgrading rural school facilities to improve teaching and learning. It outlines specific rural issues, conditions that interfere with teaching and learning, and new approaches to the rural school facilities problem.

Rural Issues

Almost half the nation's 80,000 public elementary and secondary schools are in rural areas or small towns (U.S. GAO, 1996). While urban, suburban, and rural areas share many of the same school facility problems, rural districts tend to have several distinguishing characteristics. For example, rural districts usually serve smaller, close-knit communities. The school plays an important role in many rural communities and can be a community center and symbol of community pride (Hobbs, 1995; Miller, 1995). In some cases, pride translates into a willingness to support school funding. Closer community relationships, along with a less complicated bureaucracy, can make it easier for a rural district to make decisions and communicate with the community.

Funding is the main concern in trying to maintain and upgrade school facilities, but many rural districts already have three strikes against them (Hughes, 1998). First, funding is frequently tied to enrollment. Since rural districts usually serve fewer children, they have less construction money available. Second, rural districts tend to have lower property value assessments, so when facilities funding is tied to property values, less money is available to borrow. Third, even when rural districts have relatively high property value assessments, citizens still may not be willing to pay for improvements. According to the most recent census data, the 1997 median household income in nonmetropolitan areas was $30,057 compared to $39,381 in metropolitan areas (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1998). Rural areas have a higher proportion of residents in poverty or near poverty compared to metropolitan areas, exceeded only by central cities (Nord, 1997). As a result, poor rural communities may have difficulty raising support for bond issues, leaving school districts with insufficient resources to erect or maintain school buildings (Stern, 1994).

Improving Facilities for Teaching and Learning

The U.S. GAO study (1995a; 1995b; 1996) suggests rural and small-town schools fare better than those in central cities but not as well as those in suburbs. Even so, 52 percent of all rural and small-town schools report at least one problem, including inadequate roofing, foundations, or plumbing. Thirty percent of all schools in rural areas and small towns have at least one inadequate building (U.S. GAO, 1996).

Education reforms require schools to accommodate new teaching and learning styles, which includes providing laboratory classrooms; flexible instruction areas that can facilitate small-group, large-group, and multiage instruction; and multimedia centers that offer a variety of technological resources. Rural schools, however, face a broad array of facility upgrades: 37 percent have inadequate science laboratory facilities, 40 percent have inadequate space for large-group instruction, and 13 percent report an inadequate library/media center. Some school reform efforts suggest schools should make more of an effort to include parents, provide health and social services for children, and provide day care. Again, many rural schools lack adequate space to accommodate parent support (23 percent), social and health services (28 percent), day care (82 percent), and before- and after-school care (66 percent) (U.S. GAO, 1995a).

Technology is another driving force behind building modification. Many schools lack conduits for computer-related cables; electrical wiring for computers and other communications technology; and adequate electrical features, such as proper outlets (U.S. GAO, 1995a). Technology could help many rural schools overcome barriers associated with isolation by linking educators to professional development and curriculum resources. Without the necessary infrastructure, however, schools cannot realize the true potential of technology.

Rural school facilities are also challenged by demands to meet federal mandates. The *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990* requires schools to accommodate those with special needs by installing features such as access ramps, automatic doors, and elevators. In addition, some schools are struggling to remove hazardous building materials, including asbestos, lead paint, and radon gas. Although federal programs provide some financial assistance, many rural schools lack adequate resources to comply with federal mandates.

Many aging rural schools experience problems with energy efficiency and other environmental conditions that threaten student safety and that interfere with classroom activities. Fifty-four percent of rural schools report at least one unsatisfactory environmental condition. Leading problems include energy efficiency (39 percent), indoor air quality (18 percent), and ventilation (24 percent) (U.S. GAO, 1996).

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Fixing these problems will be costly. A 1990 survey estimated that rural schools needed $2.6 billion in capital to catch up with deferred maintenance on existing buildings; the cost to replace rural schools approached $18 billion (Honeyman, 1990; Stern, 1994). Most state legislatures traditionally do not support local school districts' capital outlays and debt services; therefore, districts bear the brunt of financing facilities. Lacking the resources to fund new facilities, many rural districts allow their school buildings to continue deteriorating (Stern, 1994).

Despite increased school construction nationwide, rural districts have not kept up with urban areas. According to a recent study, from January 1994 to June 1998, about 21 percent of urban districts constructed at least one new school, compared to 9 percent of nonurban districts (DeBarros & Henry, 1999). This may be because it is easier to raise funds in metropolitan districts. Continuing disparities and inequities suggest the need for new funding formulas or state aid in equalizing funding, not just across rural and urban districts but across resource-poor and resource-rich districts in each state.

New Approaches

In 1997 Congress authorized Qualified Zone Academy Bonds (QZABs) to make school renovation funding more accessible to poor school districts. With QZABs, the federal government subsidizes a 15-year bond by providing bondholders with tax credits that approximate the interest states and communities would ordinarily pay to taxable bondholders. Authority to issue QZABs is based on each state's proportion of the U.S. population living below the poverty line. Eligibility criteria are (1) schools in a federal Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community or with at least 35 percent of their students eligible for federal free or reduced-cost lunches; (2) an education program designed in cooperation with a business, with a private business contribution of at least 10 percent toward the bond proceeds; and (3) an education plan approved by the school district, with students subject to the same standards and assessments as other students in the district (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). So far, 15 states have issued the bonds, and about half of the remaining states have authorized or are considering QZABs (Organizations Concerned about Rural Education, 1999).

The issue of facilities improvement is so complex because schools and districts must consider the needs of students, teachers, and the community. Examining the problem in the context of the community, however, can also offer solutions. For example, preserving a historically significant building can be a cost-effective alternative to new school construction (Swedberg, in press). Recent research suggests that community engagement and outreach generate support for funding rural school facility improvements (Dickerson, in press; Bohrer, in press).

Looking to the Future

At its most basic, a school facility must provide a comfortable environment for learning, including an adequately sized, safe, and dry building. Over the next five years, enrollments at public elementary and secondary schools are projected to grow by 1.3 million students (Snyder, Hoffman, & Geddes, 1999). The increased demand for building space will affect rural as well as urban areas. Rural schools in both growth and nongrowth areas will be challenged to design or renovate buildings to provide the appropriate infrastructure for new modes of instruction, learning approaches, and technology tools that will improve teaching and learning.

[1]Shortly after the GAO study, Congress created the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, http://www.edfacilities.org, to help collect and disseminate information about school facilities and related issues.

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